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Essay on Thomas G. Clemson

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Recommended Citation

"Essay on Thomas G. Clemson" (2020). *Thomas Green Clemson Papers, Mss 2*. 1695.
<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/tgc/1695>

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Thomas Green Clemson: A Few Aspects of His Personal Life

E. M. Lander, Jr.

Thomas Green Clemson was a versatile man - a geologist, a mining engineer, a scientific farmer, a promoter of scientific education - in fact, a first-rate scientist; ^{a diplomat} also, an artist and art collector, a musician, a linguist, and a lover of horses and dogs. His public life is well known. For a few minutes I wish to speak about his personal life.

When it appeared that Clemson might remain a bachelor, he met Anna Maria Calhoun, the talented ^{and attractive} daughter of Senator John C. Calhoun. The love bug bit him hard! Note his letter ~~of August 19, 1838~~ ---- "My very much beloved dear Anna: Six long weeks have passed since we parted---Up to the present moment I have not received the shadow of one word's information from yourself. . . . I have hoped and hoped again; and still hoped and hoped beyond the end of hope---but it is all hope deferred.... My mind is become a chaos and I am wretched by day and agitated by night."

Nevertheless, he persisted; and they were married on November 13, 1838. He was 31 and she 21. Their first child was born the next year, only to live two or three weeks. Calhoun Clemson arrived in 1841 and Floride in 1842. All three had been born at Fort Hill. A fourth child, Cornelia (or Nina), was born in 1855 at Bladensburg, Maryland.

What about Clemson's personality? Family letters in the 1850s indicate that he was a difficult person to live with. He was often cross and ill-tempered. He was humorless, a pessimist, a chronic worrier, and he suffered ill health. In addition, his two older children frequently irritated him. His moods seem to come and go. Here are excerpts from Anna's letters to Floride ~~in 1856~~

Commencement Address - May 5, 1952
Clemson University - Ernest M. Lander, Jr., is
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This copy to be kept with the Thomas G. Clemson Papers in the Archives Room, Clemson University Library.

"I know you will be glad to hear that [Your father] is very kind and amiable, since his return, but don't speak of this in your letter, as I don't wish him to think I speak of it."

Later.. "He is still pleasant and amiable, tho' as usual convinced he will die in a poor house, and [is] consequently unhappy."

Still later. . . . "You are mistaken in thinking he does not care for you. Since you are no longer here, to irritate him, which from your resemblance in character to himself, you often did, he has become very proud of you....If you act rightly, you may perhaps make him happier and gain an influence over him, which would be for his and all our good."

Then tragedy struck. In December, 1858, little Nina, her father's joy, died of scarlet fever. Old Mrs. Calhoun advised daughter Anna: "You must try and get Mr. Clemson to leave home, if it is but for a short time, or he will go distracted; from the tone of his letters his mind must be in an awful state."

Six months later, after a visit to Bladensburg, Mrs. Calhoun was still distressed. She wrote Anna: "I hope Mr. Clemson is better; tell him from me, that he must try and make up his mind to resign his dear little Angel to her father in Heaven, and prepare to meet her when God appoints the time for him to do so."

And hardly anyone was more closely associated with sorrow than Mrs. Calhoun. She saw nine of her ten children go to the grave before she herself was swept away after a long struggle with cancer in July 1866.

In March 1860, after Anna Clemson suffered a miscarriage, she told Floride: "Your father is as kind as he knows how. He was terribly frightened, and stranger still, very much disappointed." Clemson's spirits were soon rejuvenated by the challenge of his post as Head of the Bureau of Agriculture. He even began to spruce up his Bladensburg farm. He took a business trip to Europe, and

upon his return in November, Anna happily confided to Floride: "Your father arrived here . . . looking as well as I ever saw him, and in a wonderfully good humour, which he has continued to this time---how much longer it may last, there is no knowing. He says the doctor says he must himself be calm. . . . All glory and honour to that doctor, say I. I think we should erect a monument to him."

A week later she added: "I hope you return, my daughter, determined to do your utmost to avoid worrying your father. He seems most desirous ^{so far to} live tranquilly. Let it not be our fault, if he again breaks out."

Soon, the Civil War erupted. Thomas Green Clemson, the Yankee, and his son Calhoun joined the Confederate forces, while his Southern wife Anna and daughter Floride remained in the North. Mother and daughter feared they would be incarcerated and their property confiscated. Neither occurred, and both were able to return to Pendleton shortly before the end of the war.

On July 1, 1865, Floride recorded in her diary: "Father got here in an open wagon this morning in the rain about sunrise....He looks pretty well, but is iron grey now, though not bald, which is pretty well for a man well on to 60. He started from Texas on the 3rd of last month, with nothing but Confederate money and ten cents in silver. He came from New Orleans to Hilton Head in a transport and had to sleep for six nights on the deck, as the officers turned him out of the cabin."

A few days later Floride noted: "Father is nicer and more pleasant than I ever saw him. Really affectionate and amiable. . . . He does look so well and has given up smoking. He is a dear old fellow."

"The fact is my pocket is empty and my patient ^{is} threadbare," "This is to inform you that my necessities are as urgent as when I last spoke to you."

The improvident James squandered about \$11,000 of Clemson's investment money in San Francisco. In 1860 Clemson asked a friend to investigate, and he wrote James: "Should it become necessary for [Mr. Moss] to take measures which may affect your name and the rich inheritance of a just and unspotted parent, I shall . . . grieve and ever regret that necessity which compelled me in self-defense to pursue." ^{POOR} James died penniless the next year.

Later, Clemson's feelings about his in-laws were bitterly expressed in these words: "I have been robbed, very largely by my wife's connections."

On July 23, 1871, Floride, who had married Gideon Lee, of New York, died, leaving a small infant, ^{broken-hearted} Isabella. Floride's [^]parents blamed her ill health and early death on poor medical attention and ill treatment she had received some years earlier when she attended her Aunt Barton's school in Philadelphia.

Eighteen days after Floride's death, Calhoun was killed in a train collision near Seneca. The Clemsons were utterly desolate. Then, in 1875, Anna Clemson, much too overweight, died suddenly of a heart attack. Thomas Green Clemson's immediate family was gone. Broken in spirit and health, the ^{and lonely} disconsolate [^]old man retired from social activities. Occasionally, he ventured forth, and he still received a few close friends, but he lived largely as a recluse on his Fort Hill estate. In his last few years a housekeeper was a constant companion. Death came in 1888.

My information comes largely from the Clemson manuscripts in the University Archives. However, I can recommend to you a biography of Thomas Green Clemson, written by the late Professors Holmes and Sherrill, or the civil war diary of Floride Clemson, that Professor Charles McGee and I edited.

One final note---especially for Republicans: Thomas Clemson (1710-1787) was the great grandfather of Thomas Green Clemson and the great-great-great-great grandfather of Richard M. Nixon.